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Bangladesh—the Country of the Bengal—S21XA

By Núria Font, EA3WL

Bangladesh, or rather, the Popular Republic of Bangladesh, means “the country of the Bengal”. It is a relatively young country. In 1947 the Muslim part of India separated into two sections: West Pakistan and East Pakistan. While politically one country, they were separated from one another by more than 1,600 km by India. But the geographic separation was not the only thing that separated these two parts of a country—each had its own language and culture. In 1971 Bangladesh obtained its independent status from West Pakistan under the leadership of Sheik Mujibur Rahman after a bloody war of liberation. In the 36 years since independence, the political environment has been somewhat unstable with thirteen different Chiefs of State (some of them were assassinated) and at least four coup d'etats.

Data about the country

Bangladesh is the seventh most populated country in the world with its 147 million inhabitants occupying 144,000 km² making it the world's most densely populated nation. The official language is Bangla, although English is also spoken. Eighty-three

percent of the population are of Muslim religion and 16% are Hindu. The capital of the country is Dhaka, which almost has 7 million inhabitants—12 million if we

consider the suburbs.

Why S2?

Josep, EA3BT, and I had been thinking about another DXpedition since our operation to the Congo in 2002. The Congo operation had been the event of a lifetime for us, and the desire to do yet another DXpedition was strong. Our operations had always been just the two of us, but we were now thinking about a more complex operation to an entity high on the “most wanted” list. We began to think about S2 as our possible



Tony (EA2PA), Josep (EA3BT), Núria (EA3WL), Fer (EA5FX) and Juan (EA8CAC) wrap up their DXpedition with a team picture.

destination because it was situated in 43rd place on the list of the Most Wanted Countries by “The DX Magazine” in 2006.

Considering all this, we decided the operation should have two or more stations on the air, and have 3 phone operators and 3 CW operators in order to satisfy the DX community. We set out to find a team of operators. The final group of operators was selected by August and was made up of 5 members, 3 phone operators (Juan - EA8CAC, Josep EA3BT and me, Núria - EA3WL)

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and 2 of CW operators (Fer - EA5FX and Toni - EA2PA).

From that moment we started to work hard on the project to complete the details. The date of the operation was set for the 10th to the 16th of January. We applied for the licenses and the air tickets were bought. We were being guided in our efforts in Bangladesh by my friend Mamlukar Rahman Looker (S21W). We were very lucky to have the aid of Mamlukar because he would smooth the path many times in the coming months.

Bangladesh is a country with a political system based on a parliament chosen by the people, a prime minister and a president of the nation. Its Constitution establishes that the government and the parliament must dissolve when elections are summoned, and it is compulsory to name a caretaker government which is responsible for supervising the country and conducting the elections. Yet, we never anticipated the dissolution of the parliament in October 2006 and the call for elections in January, 2007! We didn't think this should cause us any concern, and we went ahead with our plans.

There are two majority parties in the country, the BNP (Bangladesh National Party), until then in the power, and the Awami League, the main opposition party. Political instability began to become visible and we began to hear of protests, organizing strikes, and demonstrations. Needless to say, the news was disturbing.

Our planning called for two main

stations, one for SSB, another for CW and a third for digital modes. We had three transceivers, 8 antennas, 3 laptops, 2 linear amplifiers, 3 switching power supplies, more than 200 meters of coaxial cable and much other material. Altogether, we had more than 250 kg of luggage, without counting masts and other accessories that we decided to obtain once in Bangladesh. Our plans called for leaving some of our gear at the conclusion of our operation—particularly antennas, feedlines, and power supplies—to the ham members of the BARL, the Bangladeshi national radio association, so that they could use it to put that much wanted country on the air more often.

Things are not always as we want them to be. Because of the turmoil in the interim government, at the last minute it appeared our licenses to operate would not be granted. Fortunately, luck smiled on us when Mamlukar informed us that all issues had been resolved and that our licenses would be ours by the end of November. We awaited our departure date of 7 January 2007. On 3 January news came from Bangladesh of general strikes and a protest which got out of hand resulting in the death of 40 souls. Should we go in harm's way?

We decided to go anyway, hoping that general strikes would subside by our arrival in the country. On the evening before our departure we met the rest of the team at our agreed meeting place. Except for Josep and me, this was the first face to face meeting of the team. Before going to dinner, we distributed the bulky luggage between all the operators to avoid excess weight

fees. On the following day, we went to the Barcelona airport to fly to London, where British Airways was to take us to Dhaka, our final destination. Enroute from London, the flight crew learned Dhaka airport was closed due to fog, and we were diverted to Chennai, India where we had to spend the night. We called Mamlukar on the telephone to advise him of our misfortune. With some concessions from Indian immigration, we were allowed to enter India and sleep in a hotel, courtesy of British Airways, and resume our journey the next morning. We finally landed in Dhaka delayed by almost 20 hours.

All of our luggage had arrived with us! When we cleared customs, we found the director of the hotel waiting to take us to our lodging. After we had dinner, we formulated plans for the following day. Because of our travel delay, we now only had one day left for the assembly of all the stations. I talked by telephone with Mamlukar, who confirmed to me that on the following day somebody from the hotel would accompany us to

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make the purchases of all the materials that we needed.

After breakfast the next day, we went to the roof to begin assembling the antennas. Mamlukar and Mr. Nizam, S21B, soon arrived. I finally met my great friend Mamlukar face to face. What a great help he was and would continue to be for us.

The four men of the team would remain assembling the antennas, and I, the only woman, would go to market for our needed supplies. With the assistance of Mr. Nizam we assembled our list of purchases: a pair of 9 meter long water pipes to use as masts, rope, electrical wire for the antenna radials, and screen for the earth ground. This first experience of contact with local people was strange but simultaneously enriching. For me, it was a strange feeling to be there, completely alone, surrounded by dozens of male faces staring at me. At first the sensation was a little alarming. I asked Mamlukar about the suitability of my clothes, and he assured me they were correct. In the end I discovered that it was only curiosity caused by the presence of a foreign woman buying very strange things!

I began to wonder how we were going to get 9 meter long pipes back to the hotel. Mr. Nizam told me not to worry. After the payment of a reasonable amount, two local fellows loaded the pipes on a bicycle with platform, and as a Don Quixote with his lance, they set out towards the hotel through the crowded streets. Af-



Here is how our 9 meter long pipe moved through the busy city traffic of Dhaka!

ter finishing with our purchases, Mamlukar and Mr. Nizam left us for their jobs, and I along with the director of the hotel took a rickshaw back to the hotel. When we arrived at the hotel, the team confirmed to me that my particular Don Quixote had arrived at the hotel without a problem and had even hoisted the masts the 6 stories up to the hotel roof.

Upon our return, assembly of the antennas was quite advanced. When the first beam was finished, we mounted it on one of the masts and tried to hoist it, but the water pipe did not resist its weight and bent in half. On to "Plan B". We located some shorter, stronger pipe, used them for the masts and all was well. That finished the CW antenna. Next we placed the SSB beam, the vertical for 40m and 80m, and then the dipoles for WARC bands. After nightfall we were able to install everything except the antenna for 160 meters and the radials for 80 meters which we left for the next day. Everything was ready and we only had to wait for the announced beginning of the operation in several hours. We decided this was the time to have the only

dinner that we would have all together until 7 days of operation had passed.

S21XA on the air!

We planned to work in turns of four hours during the night, and of two hours during the rest of the day. To begin the operation the operators in charge were Josep, EA3BT, on 20 meters SSB and Fer, EA5FX, on 40 meters CW. At 00:00 local time they sent the first CQ. To our

amazement, not a single QSO resulted on SSB in the first two turns. Luckily Fer had better fortune and the first station in the log was JR1FUI and little by little the number of QSOs was increasing, mainly with Asian stations. Although the forecast of the propagation for those hours was not very promising, we didn't expect to have so few QSOs. Even so, we had no SSB QSOs in the first eight hours, and it was not until my time in the third turn when SSB propagation finally opened and we could make the first QSO with JA1RKL.

With the two main stations on the air, and when Josep was free of operator duties, he and another completed the antenna installations. The truth is that Josep was always occupied—he was the team leader, and was always working to ensure everything worked properly.

The first day passed, and night arrived. Fer had many callers on 30 meters and Juan also had his individual pile-up on 40 meters. In the morning we put the SSB station on 20 meters and the CW

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station on 40meters, and surprisingly we had a weak opening with the west coast of the United States. This improved our mood and encouraged us a lot. We continued operating the two main stations during the 24 hours of each successive day.

State of emergency!

The second day of operation, 11th January, was not going to be a normal day in our lives. Political turmoil had gone from bad to worse. One of the two political parties had decided to boycott the upcoming elections. The UN election observers were retiring because they did not feel the controls on the elective process were adequate. The interim government was dissolved by the acting president and curfews had been imposed by the military to try to settle the situation. A censorship of all mass media had been dictated and nobody could emit or publish any news of a political nature. Without doubting it, I called Mamlukar to request his advice. He told me not to do anything special, just continue with the operation. In the event we had to stop, somebody with authority would come to tell us to do so. Of course, he also recommended that we not leave the hotel at any time the curfew was in effect. Many sponsors and colleagues had trusted us and we felt we had to continue. Luckily, the pile-ups were intense, and while we were operating, we did not think about what was happening outside the walls of our shack.

We did get some good news that day. Finally, after three days of waiting, the hotel got its Internet connection and we could send

our first log with the first 5000 QSOs to Xavier, EA3BHK so he could put them online along with our first pictures.

That night the news was not very encouraging; the army was in the street. At midnight it was strange

to go the roof and hear a silent city where normally late at night the noise of the traffic is infernal. The curfew was effective and the inhabitants of Dhaka were all in their homes or had already taken the trains and buses that took them back to home. I went down to the shack, where the infernal noise of pile-ups made me forget what I had seen from the roof.

On the following day the former governor of the Bank of Bangladesh agreed to be the head of the provisional government, with the consensus of both major parties. And, although the declaration of the emergency continued, the curfew had been lifted. I phoned Mamlukar once again, who confirmed to me that everything was calm downtown, and that things were going to be fixed little by little. Now more calm, we continued our operation. Luckily, nobody had noticed us. With so many problems in the country, who was going to think about 5 crazy foreigners with radio



Josep, EA3BT, takes his turn on 20 meters SSB under the banner of INDEXA.

equipment and antennas?

During the third day of operation, we finally put the RTTY and 6 meter stations on the air. All the stations and antennas were working and QSOs were added at a good rate, although we often had noise levels of S5 or more. Operations continued through the week.

S21XA goes QRT

The 7 days of operation finally arrived at its end. At 23:59 on 16 January S21XA was QRT, with more than 17,300 QSOs in the log. We had fulfilled most of our aims:

- o to be active whenever the conditions of propagation allowed us,
- o to concentrate on the bands and modes for which this DXCC entity was more needed, and
- o to be aware of the possible openings for those zones where there was more need (NA and SA, mainly).

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With our array of antennas atop our hotel, we didn't think our presence could be missed. Yet, officials must not have deemed us a threat during the period of political unrest. See text on Page 4.

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Now the only thing left to do was to disassemble our stations, and as always, Mamlukar helped us. Early in the morning a worker from his company was ready to help us in everything that we wanted. In less than 3 hours, we had everything disassembled and packed.

On 17 January we had a meeting with several members of the BARL. We talked about our radio experience in S2, as well as comparing the situation of amateur radio in our respective countries. At the end of the meeting we presented to BARL all the beam antennas, dipoles, switched power supplies, and cables used during our operation with the aim that all that material would be used by the local radio hams and to foment amateur radio in that country.

Our flight was to leave Dhaka at 5 a.m. on 20 January. The evening before our departure we were treated to typical Bangladesh cuisine at the home

of Mr. Nizam and at the home of Mamlukar's brother. We tried to eat everything offered, but it was impossible to finish all the food. Everything was so nice, especially the desserts. After midnight we had to leave our friends, since the airplane would not wait for us. With tears in the eyes I had to leave my good

friend Mamlukar who, without knowing us personally, had treated us in the best way that a person can be treated. Mamlukar, THANKS WITH ALL MY HEART!!

S21XA, a project that we had begun to forge more than two years earlier, had finally arrived at its end.

Some data about our operation:

- o Callsign: S21XA
- o QSL via: EA3BT
- o Total QSOs: 17,317
- o SSB QSOs: 8,427
- o CW QSOs: 8,142
- o RTTY QSOs: 748
- o Bands worked: 160m-10m

I have to say thanks to all those who believed in our project. The list is very long. To all of them, many thanks.

Núria Font, EA3WL



We were pleased to be able to leave an assortment of antennas, switching power supplies, and feedlines with the BARL to help Bangladesh hams get on the air.

INDEXA Ballot—2007-2008

Office	Nominee	Yes	No	Write-In
President	ZL1AMO			
Vice President	K8YC			
Sec.-Treas.	W4UNP			
Director (1 year)	XE1CI			
Director (1 year)	K4UEE			
Director (1 year)	W4NL			
Director (2 years)	DJ9ZB			
Director (2 years)	N4AA			

Note: W9RG was elected to a 3-year term as director in 2005.

Voting Instructions

Please vote by paper ballot. If you receive the e-version of the newsletter, print the ballot and mail it in paper form only; not via e-mail. If you are unable to print your ballot, the election officer, W4UNP, will at your request mail a paper ballot to you via the postal service. Send your request to: w4unp@comporium.net. Please indicate your return address on the outside of the envelope used to remit your ballot. All ballots must be returned to the election officer no later than September 22, 2007.

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